

AN INTERVIEW WITH B.J. IRVINE

by Erika Dowell



Betty Jo Kish Irvine is Director of the Fine Arts Library at Indiana University. During her almost 40 years as a librarian, she has been an active member of the Bloomington art community, on campus and off. Irvine has also served as mentor to scores of art librarians through her work in the IU School of Library and Information Science (SLIS). She also directs the art librarianship specialization and dual-degree masters' program in SLIS and the History of Art/School of Fine Arts.

Erika Dowell is Public Services Librarian at the Lilly Library on the IU Bloomington campus. She went to library school while working with BJ at the Fine Arts Library and continues to be a grateful beneficiary of Irvine's mentoring.

Dowell talked with Irvine about the role of the academic art library in the larger community, the history of the art librarianship program at IU, and future prospects for the profession.

Dowell: As a public institution, the libraries at IU are open to the public. Would you outline some of the ways the IU Fine Arts Library intersects with the larger Bloomington community, as well as the ways you are involved in the Bloomington art community, outside of the University?

Irvine: My major point of interaction with the community is the Friends of Art (FoA). I've been on the FoA Board for over ten years. [The FoA is a non-profit organization that promotes the visual arts at IU and funds scholarships for IU art students.] I've always seen that involvement as a way of connecting directly with people in the community. Of course the fact that the FoA office is down the hall from the Fine Arts Library helps as well.

One of the other ways I maintain connections with campus and community art venues and organizations, such as the Waldron Arts Center, Bloomington Area Arts Council, and other art galleries in town, is that I try to attend as many receptions and openings as possible. There is a level of visibility that I gain that way. People recognize me. They talk to me about the library, and they seem to appreciate that somebody from the

University is there, whether it's The Gallery [a commercial gallery] or the Bellevue [a cooperative artists' gallery]. There is a limit to how many organizations that you can be connected with. But I know people, they know me. I've offered to help them out, reassuring them that if they need access to the library, if they need reference assistance, we are here.

I always have felt that it was part of my job to be aware of what was going on in the local arts community. As part of that realization, years ago, I started building up our vertical files on the local arts. At one time, similar to other art libraries, we had a typical vertical file collection filled with numerous pictures ranging from barns to houses to cartoon characters. We had the typical collection of clippings and postcards that art libraries tended to save—if they are going to save that type of ephemeral material. Very early on I recognized the need for keeping information about the local arts community. For example, when the Bellevue Gallery celebrated its 10th anniversary my Fine Arts Library (FAL) files were actually more complete than their internal archives. So we complemented each other. We photocopied what we had and made sure their archive was complete; thus, we have a very extensive archive on the Bellevue Gallery, the oldest continuing art cooperative in Bloomington.

Early on, as a state institution, I realized that we have an agenda to serve the citizens in the State. So it is up to me to re-assure people that our art library is part of that arena of accessible resources. Over the years, I have stayed connected to the librarians at the Indianapolis Museum of Art Library. So that if someone walked into my library in Bloomington, whether it was a public citizen or a student or faculty member, and I knew that there was something at the IMA that they needed, I would immediately know enough about the IMA to direct them to the librarian there. And I do the same thing with the Eiteljorg Museum Library or the Herron School of Art Library, IUPUI, and so on.

We have always been very open to people who just visit, call or email the library. They can walk in the door, and we always try to be of assistance. We could probably do more, but I think we do a respectable job of staying

connected and accessible to our community. And in part I think we do a better job of that because I do make a point to stay connected to all these art and art-related institutions.

Dowell: You touched on my next question which asks, what does this kind of involvement bring back to your work at the Library? You talked about how you work to bring in actual physical resources with information about art in the community, but it also allows you to act as a resource for people regarding what is going on with other institutions and with the community.

Irvine: One of my early activities with the Bellevue Gallery was to do a retrospective exhibition in our Fine Arts Library exhibition cases about the Bellevue. I also did several artists' books shows at the Bellevue before I ever actually exhibited my own work. I involved students and our faculty in these exhibitions; consequently, there was this connection between the two places. When I talk to the professional methods class taught by Betsy Stirratt, Director, School of Fine Arts Gallery, I always bring in the Bellevue connection and she talks about it, too, i.e., how important it is for students to be connected to the community, and to show their art locally. You would think there would be a lot of opportunities to show, but there are not as many as you would imagine in Bloomington given the number of artists in the University and the community.

Dowell: How does being an artist yourself affect your work?

Irvine: I think my love of art is really what brought me to the library. My love and appreciation for art were present long before I ever thought of being a librarian. Becoming an art librarian was actually a happy accident. For years I did disconnect from my practice of art, but I reconnected about fifteen years ago, showing at the Bellevue Gallery and actually studying again. I think it helps when I talk to students, especially studio classes about using the library. It also makes me more sensitive to buying materials that relate to the practice of art rather than only to the history of art. It gives me more affinity with the studio artists, faculty and students in the School of Fine Arts. My background provides a vocabulary for communicating with artists. Perhaps it improves my credibility, but I'm not sure about that. Usually people are rather surprised, in fact, that I am actually a closet painter. I call myself a Sunday afternoon painter, because that's when I practice Chinese ink painting, once a month on a Sunday afternoon. People usually realize my commitment to art when I discuss their work and talk about artists' books. They see that I am involved from a number of perspectives. It is not just as from a historical perspective. I look at art with an "artist's eye" or sensibility. And who knows, maybe that is why I've become so committed to collecting artists' books for the FAL. Perhaps, if I had never

had that connection with art I might not have felt as strongly about this innovative art genre which crosses boundaries between books and art. Art historians, and even art students sometimes look at me and say "That's not art [artist's book], why do you think that's art?" Then I might respond, "Why do you think it's not art? What is art?" So I think being an artist helps me connect with my students and other library patrons.

Dowell: Certainly over the past ten years lots of art reference tools, particularly indexes, have changed, moving from print to digital. I know that people who are not affiliated with IU still have access to these online resources when they come into the library, but do you think it is more difficult for a non-affiliated user to come in and use the library for their own research?

Irvine: I think so. First of all, you see that computer sitting in the library and the first thing you see is the login screen. People don't realize they can login as a patron not affiliated with IU. I don't think there is any way under the sun that the typical person would walk into this library and realize that they can automatically access the library catalog online. I do think the computer system in libraries tends to be a bit formidable. It's not like walking into the Monroe County Public Library where you can immediately get into the system. Depending upon what generation people are part of, they may be more or less comfortable with computer-based resources; however, age certainly is not the sole determining factor of computer-comfort levels.

What I do notice is that people are very receptive to my saying, "Would you like me to show you how to do that?" And then you basically do the reference footwork for them. And many people want to do it that way because, if they are not used to navigating our databases and library network, it is very confusing for them to access our systems. Showing them volumes of Art Index on a shelf is very different from directing them to the Wilson Web interface where they have up to eighteen databases to select from before they can even search for art information.

These systems are not always intuitive—even for some of our younger or new IU students. In fact one of my recent students in A575 [Research Sources in Art History, taught annually by Irvine in the History of Art program], who came from a small liberal arts college, told me that they didn't have online access to most of the online databases that I expected her to use at IU. She also said they didn't have an online catalog. Every time I teach this course, at least one of my students comes to IU with a similar undergraduate library experience. Our community is very diverse in Bloomington. I still have faculty, sometimes mature faculty, especially those coming from smaller institutions, who are a little computer-shy. So I think it is often very challenging, for anyone to just walk in and use our library resources.

Dowell: I'm going to shift gears a little bit now. What are the current job prospects for someone who wants to become an art librarian?

Irvine: I think this is a very interesting question. What I notice now, and I'd say it started in the last two years, is that there are two to three visual resources (VR) job openings for every one traditional art librarian position. These are listings for visual resources librarians and metadata/ image librarians who may also be called slide librarians or VR curators. Expansion in the VR profession is one of the big changes.

I think other major changes have come from retrenchment and budget cuts during the 1980s and 1990s and which, unfortunately, are still occurring. Libraries started cutting back on second- or entry-level librarian positions. It wasn't a pattern I only saw at IU. It was a pattern my colleagues also were experiencing in the profession. To reduce personnel expenditures, many libraries have been shifting librarians more and more to management-level positions and have support and paraprofessional staff (full and/or part-time) do all the other work in the library. It has been one way to exploit the budget. When I am working with students preparing to enter the profession, these changes have an impact on their job prospects.

At this time, there seem to be more opportunities in VR. What is interesting, too, is the type of positions currently open. Are they only for staff in charge of the collections? No, they may even be for a second-level position so that the VR collection might have two full-time librarians or professional positions. Art libraries used to have that staffing pattern. I'm seeing that staffing pattern shift away from art libraries, unless they are very large, to digital image collections which recognize the need for that type of support. So it is natural that the students looking at job prospects need to be preparing more for VR positions as well.

I am encouraging everyone who goes through the dual-degree program right now to gain experience working with Eileen Fry, Slide and Digital Image Librarian, who directs our Slide/Digital Image Library. I've always tried to make sure students spent a substantial amount of time with Eileen during their SLIS internships, but now as soon as they come in, if they are at all interested in VR, I tell them to talk to Eileen as soon as possible. This fall semester, we have been awarded a SLIS merit assistantship for an image metadata specialist for the next two years, and we are so excited about this opportunity which allows our students to gain substantive VR experience prior to entering the job market.

What is interesting to me, and I've been complaining to my colleagues about it for at least five to ten years, is that this pattern—the pattern of decreasing entry-level positions—means that more than ever, we have an obligation to make sure that the students who come

out of our programs are getting the proper background to prepare for library and/or VR positions. The problem is that for traditional librarian positions, they now want you to have five to six years of experience. Well, how are my students going to have five to six years of experience? Yet I know some of them could probably do some of these jobs, and I tell them to apply for these positions anyway. Because where are libraries going to recruit from? If we are getting rid of our second- and entry-level positions, it will be people with support staff, paraprofessional, or even extensive part-time experience who will make up the job pool.

Dowell: It's the same situation with other fields of librarianship. There was recently a special collections librarian position advertised as an entry-level position. I heard they had more than two hundred applicants. Today it is almost shocking to see a position described as "entry-level" instead of requiring two to three years of experience. Students have to figure out how to make the case that they have enough experience to actually get an interview.

Irvine: This is why I now insist that everyone going through the program work, even if it is just five hours a week. I call this "getting the edge"—the edge in the job market. So that when you enter the job market, you have a resumé that may include work in the Fine Arts Library, work in the Slide Library and Digital Image collection, work at the Lilly Library or at the Wells Library Reference Department. You've got to have that edge today. No matter what the position is, they don't usually want to hire someone green who has no prior work experience.

On that issue, now we are encouraging our students to do the SEI, the Summer Educational Institute. It's the internationally recognized training program for the VR profession. By the way, thanks to Eileen Fry's pioneering leadership, IU will host SEI in 2007. It is very competitive to register because there are only forty-five openings for North America.

I also encourage students to get an edge by "getting out there". Not only do they have to do an internship, but if they can do it outside IU with somebody really good, that's even better. An important part of networking is fleshing out that resumé. Our internship program already includes opportunities to intern at the Indianapolis Museum of Art and Herron School of Art Libraries

My experience is that most of our students get some type of position, but it is harder now. They've got to be absolutely as flexible as possible. And that means they may go out and get a different type of job. One of my students is already talking about an online reference opportunity in Iowa because she wants live in that area. Usually, it means that you have to be looking for more widely accessible jobs but I also think the strength of

their visual arts background, library and/or digital image experience at IU, and all the things that I recommend they do during their SLIS degree will help them. For example, I tell them to take as many of the database and web design classes as they can. Today, you have to make sure you are as broad-based as possible. I think it may take a little longer to get a job today but if you are persistent and you get as much of an edge as possible, I think you can do it.

Dowell: You've already touched on some of the major changes facing the field today, the emphasis on digital imaging, for example. Are there other changes you want comment on?

Irvine: Digital changes also include databases and how they have evolved. You can be a lot more creative. For example, I had an instructor come into FAL who was getting ready to teach art history at the Herron School of Art at IUPUI. She wanted to know, "What is a good, small, inexpensive art history survey textbook that covers the entire history of art and architecture?" History of art and architecture books, small and cheap? OK. [Laughs.] There was one big book that Abrams published in 2001. She had looked at that book but it was too big, too expensive. And you know what I finally told her to do? I said something that wouldn't have occurred to me five years ago. I told her to use the *Grove Dictionary of Art* online. You just tell your students how to go online and the *Dictionary of Art* becomes your textbook. It is a very different way of thinking about teaching and introducing people to art. It wouldn't even have been a possibility ten years ago. That is certainly a different way of thinking about access to information. And I think all the students coming out of here need to be, as Eileen Fry would say, "thinking outside the box".

Dowell: You run one of the premier programs for education in art librarianship, the dual-degree program in which students earn a master's degree in Art History and M.L.S. Tell me about the development of this program. How did it get started?

Irvine: How did we get started? Well, IU has a history of having more dual masters' programs than any other library school in the country. As far as I know that is still the case. So what happened twenty years ago? I had been working with students planning to go into art librarianship beginning back in 1968. Here's what I used to do. They enrolled in an internship with me, and during the first four weeks I taught a mini-seminar introducing them to art librarianship. Then they had to work in the Fine Arts Library. But during the first three or four weeks, they sat in my office and I talked to them about the profession.

In the 1980s, one of the art historians who had heard about the dual degree programs asked me why we didn't we have a program combining the M.A. in art history and the M.L.S.? So I prepared the documentation and went before the appropriate campus committees, and it was approved. Once the degree program was established, that mini-seminar turned into the three-credit "Seminar in Art Librarianship", L630.

In the 1960s and '70s, there were just a few of us teaching something that could be called an art librarianship class, e.g., courses at Syracuse University, Pratt Institute, and Simmons College. We do not have a history of many formal programs. In fact, there are fewer specialization courses today than there were when I started our program in 1985/86. Of course in the 1980s many library schools started closing down including the Case Western Reserve University library school which closed the year before we started our program. Case had had the major art librarianship specialization in the Midwest, if not in the U.S..

It is interesting, I think in part because of my longevity at IU that I've been able to create a foundation and then build on that foundation. One of my priorities this summer will be talking to administrators about my retirement next year. My retirement will affect three academic departments: the University Libraries, the School of Fine Arts, and of course, the School of Library and Information Science. At some point people from these three areas will have to get together because there are budgetary and academic implications when I retire. And there are certainly implications for how this position is going to be posted. Is directing the dual degree and the art librarianship specialization programs going to be part of the job description? Is teaching A575 going to be part of the description? These duties weren't part of my job when I started. It's going to be interesting to see how this plays out. I hope that we are coming from a strong enough tradition that people will want to continue these programs because they certainly benefit our students.

Librarians have always had to adapt as environments change. From my perspective, the biggest evolution of change came with OCLC—the beginning of the online environment, and it has just exploded since the 1970s. Before that time libraries were basically all the same until we moved into the electronic era. I think that SLIS has adapted effectively and the IU librarians and staff have done an incredible job of adapting and so have our educational programs. I'd like to think that the students coming out of IU in art librarianship are part of that legacy of change and innovation.